



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Aiming at Secession: The KRG's Activism in the International Arena

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the issue of subnational units' activism in the international arena, using the case of the Iraqi Kurdistan federal region. The prevailing view in the literature is that the increasing involvement of sub-state entities in international relations is caused by globalization and growing economic interdependence. We argue that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been extremely active in the international arena to, primarily, secure a favorable international image and gain support for recognition in pursuit of a secessionist agenda. To prove our argument, we generated data through interviews with KRG officials, politicians and Kurdish intellectuals as well as through examination of secondary data, such as official documents, newspaper reports, statistics, and public speeches. Our findings suggest that the KRG has methodically acted to garner international support for its secessionist plans. This conclusion may add to the theory of federalism and paradiplomacy by suggesting that strong political motives may also be an underlying cause of sub-state units' engagement in international relations, not only globalization and economic interdependence.

**Keywords:** Federalism, International Relations, Iraqi Kurdistan, Paradiplomacy, Referendum of Independence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study addresses an interesting issue related to federalism - regions' activism in the international arena. The phenomenon is often called "paradiplomacy" and is quite well researched, as recently many subnational units have kept a high profile and played an important role in transnational relations, mainly economic and cultural. We use the case of Iraqi Kurdistan (IK), which is a federal region within the newly created Iraqi federation. This study is an attempt to add to the literature on federalism, secession and subnational units' involvement in global politics using an interesting empirical case.

### 1.1. The Problem and Rationale

The concept of paradiplomacy has appeared in literature quite recently because scholars were more interested in sovereign states' foreign policy, while the international activities of federal regions and other sub-state units have been of lesser interest to scholars and practitioners. This study focuses mainly on paradiplomacy and the main motivations behind practicing it, taking cues from Keating's conceptual framework of the economic, social, and political motivations of such activities.

One of the continuous problems in the Middle East is the unresolved Kurdish question and the Kurds' dissatisfaction with their status of being a stateless nation. In the past three decades, particular scholarly attention has been paid to IK, which already enjoys significant autonomy within Iraq's loose federation. The Iraqi Kurds' determinations to gain recognition and respect from the international community, which they believe they deserve, are one of the self-assumed missions of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

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The KRG has purposefully worked on this matter since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003. The Kurdish authorities and the representatives of the regional government abroad have played an important role in reaching out to the outside world and gaining a measure of international recognition. In August 2014 with the attacks by ISIS on Kurdistan and an ensuing successful fight against the militants by the Peshmerga (Kurdish armed forces), the Kurds gained even more international sympathy and appreciation. Today the question is no longer about the international community's awareness of the existence of the Kurds as the world's largest stateless nation, but about gaining support for their would-be sovereign state.

Hence, the broad theoretical problem this study addresses is the breakup of federations and secessionist movements facilitated by paradiplomacy. This paper focuses on KRG activism in the international arena as a strategy to achieve international recognition of a would-be independent Kurdistan.

## 1.2. Our Argument

Although various scholars entertain different views on paradiplomacy's causes and effects, there is no study, to the best of our knowledge, dedicated to paradiplomacy used as a tool for achieving independence. We argue that paradiplomacy has been used by the KRG as an effective tool to facilitate secession from the Iraqi federation.

To test our argument, we generated primary data through in-depth interviews with KRG officials, Kurdish politicians and intellectuals and relied on secondary data, such as official documents, websites, newspaper reports, statistics, and public speeches.

The study has some limitations due to the sensitivity of the subject and the time constraints; plus, only a small number of participants were available for interviews. The timeframe of this study is limited to the period starting from 2005, when the federal system was introduced in Iraq, to the independence referendum of September 2017.

## 2. THEORETICAL-EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK

In 1945 when the United Nations was created, there were only 51 members. Eventually, this number increased over the time to reach 193. Many, currently, sovereign states were colonies or parts of larger countries. The Post-Cold War International System has undergone further serious transformations. The

USSR split into many states. The latest independent state, South Sudan was admitted to the United Nations on July 9, 2011.

Scholars argue that changes in international politics, globalization and the end of Cold War created circumstances conducive to self-determination and state building (Hehir and Robinson, 2017), but independence still needs the international community's approval. To become sovereign, an aspirant must be recognized by the international community and therefore accepted in the club of sovereign states (Griffith, 2017). Many ethnic minorities within larger countries aspire to achieving independence; over 10 of them have become sovereign states during the past 20 years (Feniman, 2013). There are four elements necessary for statehood: Population, territory, government, and sovereignty (Chanhchom, 2010). The Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) has already some attributes of statehood, such as territory, common history and culture, language and a sense of community. What missing is sovereignty, and that is exactly what the IKR aims to gain (Croatia, 2007).

Seeking independence becomes an option for various groups of people who are different from the titular nation ethnically, religiously, and ideologically. This might lead to conflict and the use of force (Goldesten and Pevehouse, 2012). There are a few important factors that typically speed up the process of acceptance into the club of sovereign states - suppression of the national identity and economic exploitation, as well as an abundance of natural resources and a high profile in the international arena. Paul emphasizes the importance of having a sort of diplomatic relations in order for a breakaway entity to become independent. He says, "diplomatic recognition confirms legitimacy on a new state, but sometimes there is divided consensus within the international community" (Paul, 1996. p. 8).

As there is no readily available theoretical framework that could help us to adequately understand a substate's behavior in this respect, we will significantly draw on the writings of Keating, who argues that paradiplomacy is used for three distinct reasons by actors at the substate level: Economic, social, and political. We also use Andre Lecour's insights into the aims of paradiplomacy: To create an "international personality" that can serve various purposes.

For many, the concept of paradiplomacy is new and derives from the concept of diplomacy. With some similarity, the two terms have different meanings. Each refers to a different type of relationship in the international relation. Satow defines diplomacy as:

The application of the intelligence and the tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states, or more briefly the conduct of business between states by peaceful means (Satow, 2009).

He argues that only the central government of a sovereign state can use diplomacy and have diplomatic relations with other states. The term “paradiplomacy” was first used in the 1980s in Canada and the USA. The scholar who coined the name was Soldatos who reduced the phrase “parallel diplomacy” to paradiplomacy (Soldatos, 1990). For Aldecoa and Keating paradiplomacy is “the foreign policy of non-central governments” (Aldecoa and Keating, 2000), while Berridge defined it as:

In general, activity analogous to diplomacy conducted by anyone without diplomatic status, in particular, a member of a nongovernmental organization or private individual acting independently, specifically international activity by regional governments such as the Canadian province of Quebec and the stateless nations such as the Kurds (Berridge and Alan, 2003).

Some scholars refer to the term as “a direct international activity by subnational actors, supporting, complementing, correcting, duplicating, or challenging the nation state’s diplomacy.” (Bursens and Jana, 2010) Duchacek suggested using “microdiplomacy” instead (Duchacek, 1990). In this study, by paradiplomacy we mean a direct interaction and political activities of sub-states units in the international arena, quite in line with Wolff’s definition:

The capacity of sub-state entities’ participation independent of their metropolitan state in the international arena in the pursuit of their own specific international interests.”

In other words, paradiplomacy is the involvement of substates or regions in international relations with specific agendas that serve their interests (Wolf, 2007).

In the new era of globalization, regions’ activities have become rather common and play a noticeable role. In normal situations, countries are committed to the Westphalian concept of state where the state has the highest authority (D’Anieri, 2010). Obviously, paradiplomacy seems to undermine the traditional understanding of global politics as the interaction of states only.

It is not always clear what paradiplomacy entails and serves to achieve. Some argue that substates are active in the

international arena to achieve their hidden agenda. Aguirre claims that paradiplomacy goes “beyond diplomacy and that is due to the fact region’s interest do not go side by side with the federal government’s interests” (Aguirre, 1999. p. 205) The classical examples of substates engagement in paradiplomatic activities are Quebec, the Basque country and federal regions in Belgium; today, there are other similar examples, such as the UK, Spain, Germany, China, Italy, Japan, Austria, Argentina, Russia, and Mexico (Setzer, 2013). Practicing paradiplomacy by sub-states has various reason and motivations, which can be summarized as economic, cultural, and political (Keating, 2000). Lecours calls them “layers.” The first layer relates to economic issues; regions or substates work for an international presence to attract external investments and promote trade. The second layer is social, cultural, educational, scientific, and technical cooperation. While the third layer, political considerations, where the substate works to assert its national character and achieve political autonomy (Lecours, 2008. p. 5). Wolff, justifying sub-states interests in international relations, claims that regions and sub-states practice paradiplomacy to solve conflict relating to self-determination:... should be embraced as a necessity and opportunity in the process of managing and ultimately resolving what might otherwise be protracted conflicts” (Wolf, 2007).

In Paradiplomacy and Stateless Nations, André Lecours and Luis Moreno claim that “paradiplomacy serves as a means for identity and nation-building; that it sustains and promotes specific interest definitions such as cultural preservation; and that the intergovernment conflicts it involves provide opportunities for political-territorial mobilization (Lecours and Moreno, 2001).

Keating argues that most of the regions and substates with national aspirations use paradiplomacy to pursue their political goals and fulfill their nationalistic dreams of statehood and sovereignty. Quite often, it is indeed used as a strategy to achieve recognition beyond the status of a minority region without raising suspicions of separatism (Keating, 2000).

Paradiplomacy is also used outright to gain independence, to prepare the international opinion and have support from countries that might grant recognition when independence is actually declared. Catalonia is one of the most active regions that promote itself internationally with a view to gaining independence from Spain. In 1992 and during the Olympic Games, the government of Catalonia used a smart strategy to promote the region by placing an ad in English asking

“Where is Barcelona?” driving the reader to rethink about the answer they know, and clarifying that it is in Catalonia, not Spain. Keating strongly believes that nationalism is one of the strongest motivators of sub-states paradiplomacy, while Lecours adds that those substates aim at creating an “international personality,” to maintain a high profile in the global arena.

Scholars agree that substates are active in the international arena in pursuit of specific interests although they are expected to operate in collaboration with the central or federal government (Keating, 2000). Quite often, they pursue pure political goals that might defy the central government: Creating “international personality,” asserting their distinct ethnic identity and seeking recognition (Wolf, 2007). Paquin and Lachapelle claim that when regions are deprived of their rights and unable to pursue their interests due to the absence of sovereignty, they tend to walk away out from under the central government’s umbrella (Stephane and Guy, 2005).

Sub-states that are active in the international arena quite often entertain long-term plans of secession. Baalthazar suggests distinguishing protodiplomacy, which is harmful to the federal relationship, from paradiplomacy, regional international activism in line with the federal government foreign policy and is not aimed at secession. Baalthazar argues that protodiplomacy means the diplomatic efforts of representatives of sub-state entities that seek recognition for an eventual sovereign state (Balthazar, 1999. p. 162). In this study, we embrace Keating’s conceptual framework and use the term “paradiplomacy” that encompasses all international activities by subnational units, be they economic, sociocultural or political steps aimed outright at secession.

### 2.1. IK, a Brief Background Note

After the collapse of the Ottoman and Persian Empires, the Western powers fractured them, and the current Middle East is essentially the result of this partition. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kurds were promised an independent state, but their hopes were dashed in 1923 when the Treaty of Lausanne was signed. The Kurds became the victim of this division separated in four countries - Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria (Nezan, 2017). Despite this division, the Kurds have preserved their unique culture, language, and identity.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 offered an exceptional opportunity for the Kurds who perceived it as it as more of “liberation” than “invasion.” They welcomed the US troops and proved their trustworthy allies (Cockburn, 2013). After the collapse of the Baath regime, the new central

government was busy rebuilding Iraq, while the Kurds were a decade ahead in state-building, as they had developed their governmental institutions since the introduction of the no-fly security zone in 1991. At the same time, they actively participated in drafting the Transitional Administrative Law and the 2005 constitution and decided to stay within a new federal Iraq (Phillips, 2015).

## 3. KURDISTAN’S PARADIPLMACY: EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

Only a few solid scholarly works are dedicated to Kurdish paradiplomacy. Stefan Wolf argues that the Iraqi constitution has various gaps concerning the federal relationship as well as the region’s rights to engage in foreign relations (Wolf, 2010). Hence, based on the provided literature, there are different views on paradiplomacy, its aims, goals and its effectiveness. On the other hand, Danilovich argues that the regional paradiplomatic activities of Kurdistan “desire to assert national identity at home and abroad, not to secede.” He believes that the region has decided to live under the Iraqi flag. However, it practices its diplomatic activities only to gain recognition from outside, not to demand independence. Furthermore, he adds that the Iraqi constitution does not grant the right to secession from the federation (Danilovich, 2014).

Only after the enactment of the Iraqi constitution in 2005, the KRG practically became a federal region. It started working out some important aspects of domestic policy and eyeing the international arena as well. In 2006, the KRG established a Department of Foreign Relations headed by an official at a ministerial rank. In order not to irritate the federal government, a more indirect title such as head of the department has been used (Bengio, 2012. p. 299-308).

The Department’s mission is to conduct relations with the outside world. It is considered an essential unit of the KRG cabinet. The DFR is responsible for building relations with the international community, promoting trade, attracting investment, tourism, and maintain institutional ties with foreign countries. The DFR supervises the IKR’s representations abroad and also coordinates relations between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad and has its representation in Baghdad (Bengio, 2012). On the other hand, there are over 40 international representations in the Region, such as consulates, embassy branches, international organizations, and trade offices.



### 3.1. Department of Foreign Relations: KRG Instrument of Paradiplomacy

Since the establishment of the Department of Foreign Relations in 2006, Falah Mustafa has been its permanent head. However, only in 2012, he was invited to attend cabinet meetings (Mustafa and Huda, 2017). Minister Mustafa described the mission of his department as follows:

No friends, but the mountains proverb pretty much had shaped our policies in the past; we were isolated and we needed to break that isolation. We faced animosity and confrontation and we needed to turn them into to cooperation (interview).

Interestingly, both Falah Mustafa, head of the DFR and Aladdin, Director of the Middle Eastern Research Institute, stated that what the KRG practices is not “paradiplomacy,” but real diplomacy. Mustafa stated “We may have started with paradiplomacy or public diplomacy, but now we are acting and functioning as a part of the government. We are not lesser than any other ministry” (Mustafa and Huda, 2017).

Originally, the DFR was established to be a bridge between the region and Baghdad. Then its role expanded to social, commercial, and cultural cooperation with the international community. It is important to mention that the DFR was not formed immediately after the adoption of the Iraqi constitution in 2005; the KRG realized that it was important to have a department to promote the region’s interests within Iraq and abroad. The DFR has significantly expanded its relations with various countries around the world both by establishing its representations abroad and receiving foreign representations in the region.

The DFR has three main objectives. First, to promote and protect the interests of the IKR in the world. Second, to develop and encourage important political and economic relations with the international community, particularly with neighboring countries. Furthermore, the DFR provides effective legal and consular services to foreign citizens in the region (Mustafa and Huda, 2017). The DFR has the following stated functions:

- Strengthening relations with the international community,
- Promoting trade, investment, tourism, and institutional ties,
- Supervising the KRG’s offices overseas,
- Liaising with the diplomatic community in the Kurdistan region,
- Organizing visits of political and economic delegations to the Kurdistan Region, coordinating, and organizing

KRG relations with the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Iraqi embassies abroad,

- Conducting and supporting activities that enhance the image of the Kurdistan region abroad,
- Providing legal and authentication services to the people of the region and its citizens abroad (DFR Official Website, 2017).

The DFR has seven offices, each in charge of one specific task: (1) The Office of International Relations facilitates activities of foreign diplomatic representations in the IKR, organizes visits of foreign delegations, as well as promotes the KRG’s relations with their respective countries. (2) An office that deals with the KRG representations abroad. (3) The third is the Protocol Office. It also liaises with the federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Baghdad and federal bureaus in the region. (4) The fourth is the Office of International Organizations, such as United Nations agencies and international NGOs operating in the Region. (5) The fifth is the Legal Office, which certifies and validates documents relating to foreign consulates in the IKR. (6) The sixth is the Media and Communication Office, responsible for dissemination of the KRG’s messages; it works closely with the foreign press in the region and maintains the DFR official website. (7) The last unit is the Office of Human Resources and Finances (KRG-DFR Official Website, 2017).

### 3.2. Hosting Foreign Representations

Since its establishment, the KRG has started building bridges with the outside world. The Russian consulate was the first to open in Erbil. To date, there are 35 countries that have their representations in the IKR at the level of consulates, embassy branches, and honorary consuls. This also includes commercial representations of many countries, Iran, Russia, Germany, France, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, Jordan, Egypt, the Czech Republic, Hungary, China, Italy, India, Saudi Arabia, Netherlands, Kuwait, Sudan, and Korea. In addition, there are six honorary consuls - Spain, Japan, Denmark, Belarus, Slovakia, and Brazil. The EU has a liaison office. International organizations, such as Japan’s International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea International Cooperation Agency, UNAMI regional representation office, the International Committee for Red Cross, and United Nations Mission to Iraq have their representatives in the region (DFR Official Website and Mustafa, 2017).

Opening consulates in Erbil were the start of significant developments in Kurdistan’s relations with the outside world. Turkey, one of the IKR’s most significant neighbors,

established its consulate in 2010. Obviously, foreign countries establish their diplomatic representations in the IKR as part of bilateral agreements with the Republic of Iraq and with Baghdad's consent, but their interest in having a foot in the Region stands as proof of Kurdistan's rising international profile.

### 3.3. Reaching out to the World: KRG Representations Abroad

The KRG has 14 representative offices in following countries: Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Iran, Italy, Poland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, and the USA, in addition to an office in the European Union. The KRG's representations abroad constitute the main tool of its paradiplomatic activities (DFR, 2017).

It is fair to mention that the Kurdistan Region had its representatives in the UK and the USA even before the establishment of federal Iraq; however, they represented two main political parties - the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Since 2006, things have changed, and these party offices merged and work under the aegis of the DFR. Hence, it can be said that only after the establishment of the DFR, the KRG had a unified presence in the UK and the USA. The DFR took the lead in centralizing and regulating their activities and making sure that the representatives had a decent reputation and that the host countries knew that they represented the region, not political parties.

To further centralize the operations of these offices and to well articulate the message to be carried to the outside world, the DFR organized in 2011 a series of workshops attended by all KRG representatives. A political framework was worked out, the aims and responsibilities of the representative offices were articulated and agreed on (KRG Official Website, 2017).

### 3.4. Diplomatic Marathon

One of the main paradiplomatic efforts with significant political overtones is deployed through visits of KRG top officials to foreign countries and foreign dignitaries, to the region.

In 2008, the KRG's prime minister made few visits to Iran and Korea for political and economic purposes. Later in 2009, president Barzani visited Austria, Belgium and the institutions of the European Union in his European tour. The main goal of these visits was to build relations and ask for assistance in strengthening the Kurdistan Region's judicial, health and educational systems. "We ask for your help in how we can

build our institutions, good healthcare and education systems, create an independent judiciary and improve governance" (KRG Website, 2009). Same year, the KRG witnessed many historical visits from the Turkish Foreign Affairs minister, US Senator John McCain, US UN Ambassador Susan Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and US Vice President Joe Biden.

In 2012 Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG Prime Minister accompanied by a delegation attended the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Istanbul where he privately met with the Turkish prime ministers along with the foreign minister Davout Oglu. In 2013, President Barzani was invited to participate in WEF and he had various meeting with the Dutch prime minister Mrk Rutte, the Lebanese Prime Minister Miqati, a US congressional delegation headed by then - Majority Leader Eric Cantor, Switzerland's State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Yves Rossier and President of the International Red Cross Peter Mauer to deliver a message of Kurdish existence and struggle to stand on its feet. Barzani was praised for his economic policy and overall development of the region (KRG, 2013). Furthermore, Barzani was invited for the second time to attend the WEF in 2014 in Switzerland. Fuaad Hussain the KRG chief of staff stated that the invitation underscored "the significance of the Kurdish region in world affairs" and he added, "This shows the political and economic development of the Kurdistan Region, which has attracted the attention of international centers at different levels" (Rudaw, 2014). Hence, this shows how far the KRG has come in practicing paradiplomacy to promote itself and its economic success showing itself as an investment hub.

The region paid serious attention to building relations with Arab countries; in 2010, the KRG received royalties from the UAE, Crown Prince and Ras al-Khaimah, as well as the Egyptian foreign minister. The biggest event in KRG's Paradiplomatic activities in 2010 was President Barzani's visit to the White House where he was welcomed by President Obama (KRG-DFR Website, 2017). Barzani's visit can be considered historic because as the chairman of the Kurdish Democratic Party, the ruling party in KRI, but still on the USA terrorist groups list. Furthermore, in February 2014 Barzani refused to meet with President Obama again until his party alongside with the PUK was removed from the USA blacklist. On December 2014, US Congress officially decided to take both Kurdish parties off the blacklist (Daily Sabah, 2014) Data show that only in 2010 the President, prime minister, senior officials effected more than 28 visits abroad. President Barzani alone made 14 visits and mission

same year to the US, Germany, France, Italy, Austria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and the Arab League countries (El-Dessouki, 2010). Regionally, the KRG continued to strengthen its relations with the neighboring countries.

In 2011, the Turkish PM visited the capital of Kurdistan to participate in the opening of Erbil international airport as well as the Turkish consulate. When President Barzani visited Turkey and the city of Diyarbakir, he was warmly welcomed; what is more, the hosts hoisted the Kurdish flag for the first time to emphasize the significance of the visit and cooperation between both governments (Uras, 2013). In 2013, more than 175 international dignitaries, including high officials, ambassadors, ministers, and high ranking executives from various international organizations paid visits to Kurdistan. Through these visits the KRG marketed the region to the world as a model for the rest of the Middle East and showed that the region successfully builds democracy, purposefully act to achieve stability, prosperity, promotes women's rights, tolerance, civil society, and businesses (Mansour, 2015).

In 2015, Barzani visited Ankara to discuss cooperation with Turkey in fighting ISIS. It was the first time the Turkish PM received the KRG's officials under the Kurdish flag (Abdulrazaq, 2011). This important symbolic gesture was made again in 2017 when President Barzani visited Turkey - the Kurdish flag was raised in Ataturk airport when welcomed by President Erdogan (Dolamari, 2014).

In 2015, President Barzani visited the White House for the second time and met with President Obama to discuss various issues related to the war on terrorism and improving communication with Baghdad and achieving stability in the country (Saeed, 2015). However, President Barzani and Kurdistan Prime Minister Nurchirwan Barzani repeatedly stated that they would not let Kurdistan to continue being dragged into Iraq's endless problems and sectarian conflict. After recovering from the ISIS attack, Kurdish officials became inclined to think that Iraq today is not the Iraq of 2003 when the Kurds were eager to help to build a new country. Now the country's situation is deteriorating, and the federal government's policies have been self-destructive.

#### 4. MOTIVATIONS BEHIND KRG PARADIPLMACY: ANALYSIS

In our interpretation of the KRG's paradiplomacy, we draw on Keating's insights into the motivations behind sub-

state activism in the international arena by focusing on the three main motivations that drive regions' paradiplomacy - economy, culture, and politics. We complement Keating's framework by Lecour's idea that regions attempt to create an international personality and thereby have a high international profile when the time comes for secession.

##### 4.1. Economic Motivations

After the fall of the Baath regime, Iraqi Kurds wanted to carve a wider niche in the new federation and become an important national player. At the same time, globalization has opened new horizons for federal regions, in particular, those with lavish natural resources. The KRG has opened up to foreign trade and welcomed businesses and investment by enacting liberal, business-friendly legislation. This has attracted foreign investors, in particular from the energy sector.

It is very beneficial for the developing sub-states and regions that are going through a political and economic transition to have connections and practice paradiplomacy with advanced industrialized states. This can provide them with different experiences in various aspects and create bridges for exchanging educational and investment opportunities, developing cultural programs (Lecours, 2008). Keating agrees with Lecours and affirms that in recent years economic factors became one of the most important motivations of paradiplomacy. Due to economic transformations, regions are more involved in the international arena and enter the competition in the global market for broader investment opportunities (Keating, 2000).

One of the most significant acts that opened the door to foreign investment was the enactment in 2006 of the investment law and its massive advertisement through KRG representation abroad. This made a significant difference in the economy of the region (Invest in Group Website, 2013). In 2006, the number of British companies' visits to the region was 5-7, but it dramatically increased by 2011 and reached 70 visits by British companies' representatives (KRG-UK). In November 2013, for example, an important delegation of British businesspeople that included 50 companies in construction, oil and gas, healthcare and 13 universities paid a visit to Erbil (KRG-UK).

The KRG started to reach out to countries and attract their attention through available means, such as oil and gas. Barham Salih, former KRG PM, emphasized the importance of the region's natural resources to attract international investors and companies. Before 2003, the KRG had very little experience

in extracting oil and gas (KRG, 2010). Mustafa pointed out that the region started with its neighbors and among the first countries to deal with it was Turkey. Mustafa stated, “We have energy, and they need it” (Mustafa and Huda, 2017). In 2009, the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited the IKR with a delegation of businessmen and officials to announce Turkey’s decision to open a consulate in Erbil (Morelli and Pischedda, 2014). Later, in October 2010 the Turkish Republic opened a consulate general in Erbil. “We changed confrontation to cooperation,” said Mustafa (Mustafa and Huda, 2017). Due to the openness of the region to trade and investment on one side and promoting attractive energy investment, many international oil companies found their way to the IKR. At present, there are 27 oil companies from 13 different countries that operate in Kurdistan. This includes energy giants, such as Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Gazprom, and Rosneft. Crude oil is exported through a pipeline from the region to Turkey’s Cihan port (Anadolu, 2014).

When companies, such as Exxon Mobil, sign contracts with a region, like Kurdistan, it is “seen as a vote of confidence” (Pfeifer, 2011). Foreign investments in the energy sector opened new opportunities for the KRI’s broader engagement with the international community.

The KRG uses its economic attractiveness to create a solid basis for establishing ties with foreign countries. In other words, the KRG uses its natural resources and business opportunities not only to build a strong economy but also to engage in political interaction with a view to gaining international support for possible secession.

#### 4.2. Social and Cultural Motivations

One of the highest aspirations any ethnic group entertains is the appreciation and recognition of its identity, language, and culture. In an interview for the purpose of this study, Falah Mustafa, the head of the DFR, stated:

The paradiplomacy of the KRG has many purposes and among these purposes is sharing our culture, our history and gain ... empathy and support abroad. We want to make sure through our representatives abroad that crimes committed against the Kurds ... we want to tell the world who the Kurds are (Mustafa and Huda, 2017).

He also added that the region wants to show the world how far it has come and how much it has achieved, and in order for Kurdistan to achieve more, it needs support from the international community.

We reached them out, we knocked on their doors, and we broke our isolation by taking part in different events and international festivals (Mustafa and Huda, 2017).

Hence, the KRG is trying to reach out to the international community for recognition through its culture, language, food, and identity. Keating points out that regions and large ethnic groups also seek recognition by taking part in international organizations, for example, UNESCO (Keating, 1999). Therefore, Kurdistan started to renovate the Citadel, the vestige of the most ancient history of the region. After significant efforts deployed by the KRG, in 2014, the Citadel was formally added UNESCO’s list of World Heritage sites (Neurink, 2016).

While promoting culture through paradiplomacy, the Kurds want to present themselves to the world as a modernized and developing nation. Despite all the challenges the KRG faces, it offers shelter to thousands of refugees and IDPs. That is also a very strong message to the outside world. The KRG makes sure to show to the world that the Kurds are peaceful, tolerant, diverse, and hospitable. A significant number of KRG officials use also social media to reach out to the world and share the Kurdish culture.

In other words, the KRG uses various methods and tools to promote its culture and assert its identity internationally.

#### 4.3. Political Motivations

The economic and socio-cultural drives seem secondary and are part the KRG’s main goal to engage with the international community. Minister Mustafa unambiguously said that through economy and culture the KRG provides a basis for its political engagement with other countries: “Today when foreign dignitaries, high-ranking officials or politicians come to visit Iraq they have two places to go - first, Baghdad, second, Erbil” (Neurink, 2016).

As the Kurdistan Region decided on its own volition to stay with Iraq after 2003, it expected to be more involved in international affairs but did not have secession plans. After 2005, however, Baghdad was dragged into sectarian conflicts; the Shia-Sunni civil war has reached its highest level in 2014–2016 and even now does not seem to fully subside. Meanwhile, the Kurds stayed away from the sectarian hostilities, busied themselves building their nation and eyed the international community (Cockhurun, 2010).

After 2014 paradiplomacy activities intensified as a result of ISIS’s threat. In a sense, the advent of ISIS brought



the Kurdistan Region back into the spotlight of the global media (Aladdin and Huda, 2017). Since ISIS posed a significant threat not only to the Middle East but also to global order, various countries showed support for the Region and the Peshmerga, its armed forces. ISIS's direct confrontations with the Peshmerga presented an excellent opportunity to attract the international community's attention to IK. The Kurdish question and the idea of self-determination came up naturally, as the Iraqi army failed to defend the Kurdish territory. It is interesting to note that ISIS invasion of several other Iraqi provinces did not cause much of the international community's outcry. However, when the militants approached the Kurdistan region, the international reaction was well pronounced. The KRG estimated that the international community showed its particular interest in Kurdistan and its protection. Paradiplomacy seems to have paid a significant role in achieving this change of attitude.

In 2014 the Peshmerga were the only forces on the ground fighting ISIS in the region; in addition, the KRG was engaged in an enormous humanitarian assistance campaign, hosting refugees from Syria and cities of Iraq who fled to Kurdistan after ISIS captured their homes. As a result, various foreign governments dispatched delegations to the region. Even UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon paid a visit to the region; others followed suit - the foreign ministers of Canada visited twice the region during that year, as well as the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Germany, Italy, Czech Republic, UK, and France. French President François Holland also visited the region in September 2014. This diplomatic marathon continued in 2015 (DFR Website, 2017). This is something that had never happened before in the Kurdistan region's history. The KRG perceived it as a clear sign of how successful the KRG was to build good relations with the outside world (Mustafa and Huda, 2017).

In June 2014, the Peshmarga forces liberated Kirkuk city from ISIS occupation and established control over a significant part of the oil-rich Kirkuk province, one of the disputed territories claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad. In a joint news conference in Erbil with William Hague, the British foreign secretary, Barzani plainly announced that "Kirkuk is Kurdistan." He went on, "We waited for 10 years for Baghdad to solve Article 140," referring to the constitutional provision on the resolution of disputed territories. "Now it is done because the Iraqi army pulled out and our Peshmerga forces had to step in. Hence, now, the problem is solved. There will be more no more conversation about it" (Abdel-Hamid, 2014).

In its attempt to capitalize on obvious successes in the international arena, the KRG, led by President Barzani, launched a referendum of independence in the region, including in the disputed territories liberated by the Peshmerga. In early April 2017, a joint high-level meeting of the two main parties, KDP and PUK, took place. The meeting was presided by President Masoud Barzani with the goal of holding a referendum this year. They discussed forming a joint committee to prepare for the referendum. During his meeting with the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, President Barzani stated that "Kurdistan Region will soon hold a referendum on independence to show the will of the people to the world" (Bas News Website, 2017). This is well in line with Keating's view that one of the main political motivations for a region of a sub-state entity to practice paradiplomacy is their aspiration toward statehood through preparing international opinion and seeking friends who might be potential supporters at an early stage (Keating, 1999).

After the decision to hold a referendum on independence was made, the DFR instructed its representatives abroad to publicize the idea of Kurdish self-determination and to prepare the hosting countries for Kurdish independence: "We do not want to surprise them, said, Minister Mustafa, they must be prepared" (Mustafa and Huda, 2017).

While various scholars and analysts do not consider the KRG's paradiplomacy as aiming at secession, our findings challenge this view and demonstrate that one of the main underlying motives of the KRG paradiplomacy is the political plan to break away from the Iraqi federation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we attempted to explain how the activism in the international arena of subnational units may be driven by secessionist intentions. The literature review helped us develop a theoretical explanatory framework that drew extensively on Keating's and Lecours ideas which significantly guided us in this project.

We examined the motivations behind the KRG's activism in the international arena and looked at its economic, social, and cultural, as well as political aspects. The KRG employs various tools for paradiplomacy: (1) The Department of Foreign Relations, (2) the KRG representative offices abroad, and (3) the foreign diplomatic missions in Erbil.

We argued that the KRG is driven in its international activism not so much by economic considerations and factors of

economic interdependence, but mostly by political motivations - preparing grounds for independence, making sure that the international community will be supportive when it happens.

Our findings show that the KRG does use paradiplomatic actions to pave the road for an independent Kurdish state. That is particularly evident from our analysis of the DFR's activities. Even when developing economic links, using natural resources, the KRG pursue its political agenda. Our findings also suggest that the KRG has significantly succeeded in its efforts in the international arena, as its officials are well respected by the international community and maintain good relations with the leaders with the world's powerful countries, such as the US, UK, Turkey, and France.

Finally, our findings suggest that the direct statements on secession and self-determination of Kurdistan and seceding from Iraq by the KRG President, Prime minister and the Head of DFR, as well as many other officials is a clear sign of the plans behind its paradiplomatic activities. Our observations stand as proof that the economic, social and cultural as well as political activities of the KRG - all aimed at secession and securing international support. If a subnational unit is extremely active in international relations, it most likely has secession in its plans. We hope that these findings are generalizable and thereby add to the literature and theory of federalism and secession.

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